

Patterns of religious attendance

by Warren Clark

Many people attend religious services and participate in religious organizations because it is important to their well-being. Churches, synagogues, mosques and temples provide spiritual sustenance as well as informal support networks. Research also shows that participation in religious organizations is associated with involvement in volunteer organizations, sports, service clubs and social groups, which help people to establish social networks and friendships.

Over the last 50 years in Canada, the percentage of the adult population attending religious services has declined dramatically. In 1946, a Gallup poll reported that 67% of adults attended religious services during a typical week; in 1998, only 22% did. Because participation in religious services and organizations encourages the development of shared community activities and values, some observers are concerned about the effect of declining religious attendance on social cohesion in the general society. This article uses the General Social Survey (GSS) to identify some of the factors that may contribute to regular attendance at religious services.

Regular religious attendance lower for all ages

Between 1988 and 1998, regular attendance at religious services (attending at least once a month) has fallen from 41% to 34% of Canadians aged 15 and over. According to the GSS, the religious activity of Canadian adults declines between their mid-teens and their mid- to late twenties.

CST What you should know about this study

Almost every year since 1985, Statistics Canada's General Social Survey (GSS) has interviewed adults aged 15 and over living in private households in the 10 provinces; in 1998, about 10,700 respondents were interviewed. In addition to demographic and socio-economic data, the GSS has collected information about the frequency of attendance at religious services (excluding special occasions such as weddings, funerals, baptisms). Possible responses were: at least once a week, less than weekly but at least once a month, a few times a year, at least once a year, not at all. The term "regular attendance" is used throughout this article to refer to attendance of at least once a month.

This is a time when young adults are first establishing their independence from their parents, and then establishing families of their own. Regular attendance rates begin to rise again among adults in their early thirties to reach their highest level among seniors aged 75 and older.

However, over the last 10 years, attendance rates have fallen for adults in all age cohorts. The most stark example is provided by youths. The regular attendance rate for people aged 15 to 24 was 34% in 1988. By 1998, when they were 25 to 34 years old, the rate had dropped 10 percentage points to 24%. Among older age groups, the drop has been negligible. For example, 55- to 64-year-olds in 1988, who became 65 to 74 in 1998, saw regular attendance rates drop by only one percentage point. At the same time, though, this cohort also saw non-attendance rates increase from 20% to 26%, indicating that infrequent attenders are becoming non-attenders.

Marriage and children make a difference

The many religious traditions in Canada are generally linked with values and attitudes that support marriage and parenthood. Research shows that there is a positive association between religious participation and traditional attitudes about family formation.¹ Strong religious values formed in childhood may encourage early family formation and participation in religious organizations later in life. This may be reflected in a regular religious service attendance rate for young marrieds aged 15 to 24 that is nearly double that for singles the same age (44% compared with 26%).

Religious attendance is also higher for couples with children. Married couples aged 25 to 44 with young children were more likely to attend

1. Clark, W. 1998. "Religious Observance, Marriage and Family," *Canadian Social Trends*, Autumn 1998.

Regular religious attendance rates¹ are lowest for 25- to 34-year-olds

	1988	1998
	%	
Total aged 15 and over	41	34
15-24	34	26
25-34	32	24
35-44	39	29
45-54	47	34
55-64	52	43
65-74	57	51
75 or older	60	56

1. Attended at least once a month in the year preceding the survey.

Source: Statistics Canada, General Social Surveys.

Married people with children are most likely to attend religious services regularly¹

	15-24	25-44	Age 45-64	65 and over
	%			
Total	26	27	37	53
Men	25	24	32	49
Women	27	30	43	56
Single	27	22	27	60
Lone parents	--	23	34	--
Common-law	11	10	14	--
Married	44	33	41	53
Men	--	31	37	53
Women	49	34	46	54
No children	--	27	40	53
Children under age 5	--	34	--	--
Children aged 5-14	--	35	47	--
Children aged 15 and over	--	24	41	54
Separated, divorced	--	22	25	40
Men	--	12	14	--
Women	--	28	33	50
Widowed	--	--	48	54
Men	--	--	--	41
Living alone	--	--	--	38
Women	--	--	--	57
Living alone	--	--	--	57

-- Sample size too small to produce reliable estimates.

1. Attended at least once a month in the year preceding the survey.

Source: Statistics Canada, General Social Survey, 1998.

religious services regularly (33% in 1998) than were childless couples the same age (27%). At all ages, adults living in common-law relationships were the least likely to be regular attenders.

Divorced and separated people also have lower attendance rates than married adults. The difference between rates for divorced or separated men and for married men is much larger than that for their female counterparts. This suggests that marriage breakdown has greater consequences for men's religious participation. Women are more likely to have custody of children and may want to ensure their continued religious instruction; women may also have stronger social ties with religious organizations than men. For some, it may be difficult to return to their place of worship, due to strong disapproval of divorce in some religions.

Male attendance also drops upon the death of their spouse. Senior men and women living with their spouse had nearly equal attendance rates (53% for men, 54% for women). Senior widowers living alone, however, were substantially less likely to attend, at only 38%. In contrast, rates for senior widows living alone were almost the same as those for married women aged 65 and over.

Lone parents have somewhat lower regular attendance overall than married couples with children. But their attendance patterns are similar to those of other adults with the same marital status. About half of widowed lone parents attended religious services regularly, similar to the attendance rate for all widows. Meanwhile, 26% of never-married and 27% of separated or divorced lone parents were regular attenders, rates similar to those of single and other separated/divorced adults.

Canadian-born less likely to attend than immigrants

In 1998, Canadian-born adults had lower rates of regular attendance at

religious services (31%) than people who had immigrated to Canada (43%). At the same time, immigrants were almost as likely to be non-attenders (35% versus 38%). This apparent paradox may reflect the diversity of immigrants with different religious traditions. For example, about half the Asian immigrants entering Canada between 1994 and 1998 attended religious services regularly, compared with about one in five of European immigrants arriving in the same period.

Regular attenders more common in rural and small town Canada

Rural and small town Canadians² have traditionally attended religious services more frequently than people living in big cities. In 1998, about two in five (39%) adults in rural areas and small towns attended services regularly, compared with about one in three (32%) adults living in the three largest census metropolitan areas (CMAs) of Toronto, Montréal and Vancouver.

Higher attendance in rural areas and small towns may reflect their populations, which tend to be older and are more likely to be married or widowed than urban populations. In smaller communities, religious organizations are a significant contributor to local social and cultural life, whereas large cities offer numerous other cultural and social services.

Nevertheless, in recent years, regular attendance rates have been down everywhere in Canada. The change has been greatest in large towns of 20,000 to 49,999 inhabitants, where regular religious attendance rates are now nearly equal to those in the big cities. On the other hand, the significant drop observed in rural and small town Canada may be due in part to

2. Living in census agglomerations (CAs) with population between 10,000 and 19,999 or living in rural areas outside census metropolitan areas (CMAs) and CAs.

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Regular religious attendance rates¹ have stabilized in the largest CMAs² and small towns and rural areas

	1986	1991	1998
	%		
Canada	43	35	34
Large CMAs (Toronto, Montréal, Vancouver)	35	31	32
Mid-sized CMAs ³	40	34	30
CAs ⁴ and CMAs 50,000-249,999 ⁵	47	36	36
CAs 20,000-49,999	48	35	32
CAs 10,000 to 19,999 and rural areas	50	40	39

1. Attended at least once a month in the year preceding the survey.

2. Census metropolitan area.

3. Includes Ottawa-Hull, Edmonton, Calgary, Quebec City, Winnipeg, Hamilton, London, Kitchener, St. Catharines-Niagara, Halifax, Victoria, Windsor, Oshawa.

4. Census agglomeration.

5. Includes Saskatoon, Regina, St. John's, Sudbury, Chicoutimi-Jonquière, Sherbrooke, Trois-Rivières, Saint John, Thunder Bay and smaller cities.

Source: Statistics Canada, General Social Surveys.

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Provincial variations

Regular attendance at religious services varies substantially across the country. In every province, rates have declined since 1986, but the biggest drop has been in Quebec, almost 20 percentage points. Rates in British Columbia, which have historically been the lowest, have not changed much over the years, but they are now rivaled by those of Quebec and Alberta.

	1986	1998
	% of adults aged 15 and over	
Canada	43	34
Newfoundland	58	47
Prince Edward Island	65	52
Nova Scotia	49	41
New Brunswick	63	50
Quebec	48	29
Ontario	42	36
Manitoba	42	37
Saskatchewan	55	39
Alberta	34	29
British Columbia	26	27

Source: Statistics Canada, General Social Surveys.

Characteristic of respondent	Odds ratio
Sex	
Men	1.0
Women	0.9*
Age of respondent	
Age 15-24	1.0
Age 25-34	1.0*
Age 35-44	1.2*
Age 45-54	1.8
Age 55-64	2.3
Age 65-74	2.5
Age 75 and over	3.3
Marital status and age of children	
Single (never married)	1.0*
Common-law	1.0*
Married with no children	1.0
Married with children less than age 5	1.0*
Married with children aged 5-14	1.4
Married with children aged 15 and over	1.2*
Widowed	0.9*
Separated, divorced	1.1*
Religious attendance	
Does not attend religious services	1.0
Infrequent attendance	1.3
Regular attendance	2.0
Size of community	
Large CMAs (Toronto, Montréal, Vancouver)	1.0
Mid-sized CMAs	0.9*
CMAs, CAs 50,000-249,999	1.2
CAs 20,000-49,999	1.5
CAs 10,000 to 19,999 and rural areas	1.7
Duration of residence in Canada	
Born in Canada	1.0
Immigrated to Canada in last 5 years	0.4
Immigrated 5-9 years ago	0.6
Immigrated 10 or more years ago	0.7

* No statistically significant difference from benchmark group.

Note: This table presents the odds that a respondent has a very strong feeling of belonging to their local community, relative to the odds that a bench mark group has the same feeling (odds ratio) when all other variables in the analysis are held constant. The benchmark group is shown in boldface for each characteristic.

Source: Statistics Canada, General Social Survey, 1998.

the changing population profile. Fast-growing small communities on the edge of the commuting zones of larger urban centres have become retirement destinations for urbanites seeking recreation and perhaps a quieter and less expensive lifestyle.³ Those who migrate from the big cities may bring with them their habit of attending religious services somewhat less frequently.

Canada's three largest cities had the smallest decline in regular religious attendance rates. This may in part be due to the influx of immigrants, who are more likely to attend religious services than Canadian-born adults.⁴

Religious people feel a stronger connection to their community

Recent research supports the importance of a sense of belonging to people's well-being. The 1999 Conference Board of Canada study, *Healthy communities*, makes a clear causal connection between health and belonging: people who feel they belong in a community and have personal support networks live healthier lives. The Trillium Foundation asserts that well-functioning communities respond to a hunger for belonging and connection, and sees caring communities being created by promoting participation that encourages face-to-face contact.⁵ Participation in religious organizations is one form of community participation and one way of enhancing social cohesion.

3. Mendelson, R. and R. D. Bollman. 1998. "Rural and Small Town Population is Growing in the 1990s," *Rural and Small Town Canada Analysis Bulletin*, Statistics Canada Catalogue no. 21-006-XIE. 1,1.

4. In 1996, 42% of the population of the Toronto CMA, 35% of the Vancouver CMA and 18% of the Montréal CMA were immigrants. *The Daily*, Statistics Canada Catalogue no. 11-001E. November 4, 1997.

5. Jenson, J. 1998 *Mapping Social Cohesion: The State of Canadian Research*, CPRN Study No. F|03. 1998. 19.

Indeed, analysis of the GSS data shows that people who attended religious services on a regular basis were more likely to feel a very strong connection to their community⁶ and had a greater number of friends and relatives to whom they felt close. Over one in four regular attenders (29%) in 1998 had this sense of belonging, compared with only one in seven adults (15%) who did not attend services at all. After accounting for other factors, the odds of feeling a strong connection to the community were about two times higher for regular attenders than for non-attenders.⁷ Other important contributors to feelings of connectedness were age, size of community and living arrangements. Seniors were much more likely to feel strongly about their community, perhaps because they enjoyed long tenure in one neighbourhood where they had developed strong contacts with their neighbours over the years. People living in smaller communities also were more likely to have a feeling of belonging, as were married couples with school-age children.

Furthermore, people who attended religious services regularly were somewhat more likely than non-attenders to provide care for others. This included tasks like childcare, grocery shopping, running errands or chauffeuring, as well as personal care for someone experiencing temporarily difficult times or a long-term health problem. The odds of caregiving were 1.3 times higher for regular attenders than non-attenders, after accounting for other socio-demographic factors.⁸ Other key predictors of caregiving were gender, living arrangements and education. Nevertheless, it seems that regular attendance at religious services is associated with stronger, caring communities.

Summary

Regular attendance at religious services has been falling over the last

10 years among Canadians of all ages. However, the family life cycle significantly influences attendance. Regular attendance rates are lowest for people in their mid- to late 20s; after that, rates begin to climb as people marry and have children. In fact, religious attendance seems to be most attractive to married adults. And while immigrants also have higher overall regular attendance rates than Canadian-born adults, the rates vary considerably depending on country of origin.

Analysis shows that people who regularly attend religious services are twice as likely to have a very strong feeling of belonging to their community, compared with adults who do not attend at all. This sense of connectedness may contribute to creation of stronger communities. But while regular attendance rates have traditionally been lowest in large urban areas, rates in smaller cities and towns have fallen so fast over the last 10 years that they are now among the lowest in the country.

6. Respondents rated their sense of belonging to their local community from very strong to very weak.
7. These other factors were age, sex, living arrangements, presence of children and age of children, marital status, size of place of residence, and education.
8. Other factors included age, sex, education, income, size of community, living arrangements, presence and age of children.



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